Northern Communities and the State: Is Resistance "Futile?"[*]

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This special issue of *The Northern Review* examines the interaction between peripheral northern communities and dominant central governments. Contributors provide specific examples of northern communities' efforts to negotiate their interactions with central governments. This introductory essay frames the issue within a broader perspective of state-society relations. I address the issue of group identity that shapes much of community-state interactions and the assimilationist pressures of globalism. While the peripheral nature of the North may allow it a degree of political autonomy, resistance to the pressures of the global mono-culture is less certain.

The community-state relationship is dominated by the power of the central state. I begin this essay by examining the concept of the state in world history, followed by a discussion of the rise of globalism and consequent weakening of state hegemony. As the locus of elite power migrates from the national to the trans-national, the importance of nationalism as a foundation of elite power declines. As the importance of nationalism and national integration declines, minority communities may have more success in negotiating governance issues with the state. However, political autonomy alone may not enable minority communities to resist the assimilation pressures of the global consumer culture. Without cultural and economic independence, political autonomy may be irrelevant. However, the peripheral nature of northern communities may facilitate their efforts to survive as distinct political, economic and cultural communities.

The State

The modern state is traditionally dated from the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. Previously, militarily powerful empires had conquered and ruled without

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[*] To those uninitiated to the Star Trek phenomenon, the analogy refers to a fictional race of technologically advanced communitarians who assimilate everything in their path. Their motto is "Resistance is futile."

emphasis on assimilation or homogeneity. Quite to the contrary, empires commonly maintained the separateness of conquered from conquerors. As long as tribute and obeisance were paid, conquered "nations" were frequently left to themselves. The dominant society of the empire ruled, but did not strive to assimilate other peoples. Multiple "nations" were often part of a single empire. There was no normative drive to culturally convert and "unify" the polity and no goal of "nation building." While trading caravans opened eyes to global differences, most trade still took place between homogenous neighbors.

The ancient empires did not require peripheral cultures (or nations) to assimilate core state values as long as they paid their tribute. Local cultures and religions continued to shape day-to-day life, while economic resources flowed from outlying periphery to dominant center. Without a push for assimilation, peripheral society values and culture remained stable and unthreatened, while core societies received their economic benefit from taxes and tribute and felt somewhat safe behind the peripheral buffer regions.

The rise of nation-states changed all this. Combining nation and state required citizen loyalty to a national culture, and assimilation into a single national polity. The concept of "state" assumed the existence of an "imaginary community" (B. Anderson, 1983), and formation of a national identity became the normative goal. Nation building required assimilation of "backward" groups into dominant society. Minority cultures no longer ruled themselves, but a single set of laws and institutions governed all members of the state. If a culture resisted assimilation, it was a threat to the national unity. Still, many local cultures were able to resist and maintain their cultural identities, even if at a disadvantage, until the expansion of industrialism into globalism.

Industrialism made possible the mass manufacture of consumer goods, which, in turn, required mass consumers. Until the rise of globalism in the latter half of the 20th century, mass distribution of manufactured goods was limited. The time and cost to transport large quantities of finished products across vast distances limited distant markets to the wealthy. Consequently, western cultural values tied to these products were also limited to the affluent classes of non-Western countries. Western clothing, books and food were consumed by wealthier classes, while indigenous cultures remained more or less culturally intact within their socio-economic sphere until the full onslaught of globalization.

Globalism

Globalization facilitates worldwide economic and cultural homogeneity. The explosion of global communication coupled with the reduction of costs for transportation has resulted in what Benjamin Barber (1995) calls "the McDonaldization" of the world. The influence of TV, movies and consumer publica-

tions has established global norms of behavior that erode local cultures. The availability of consumer products to fulfill imitative desires has drawn people away from local distinctiveness and difference. E-mail, the Internet, faxes and cell phones have removed still more barriers to global interactions, dissolving isolation. Cultural distinctions are increasingly minimized and marginalized by integration into the global consumer economy.

In a global economy, local political autonomy fails to threaten trans-national economic power. Under the hegemony of the nation-state, local political autonomy threatened the unity of state control. In a globalized world, economic elites do not require state chauvinism to support their dominance. In short, the state is less important in a world economy where institutions of exchange and co-operation are increasingly international. Instead of England and France, there is the European Community. In North American there is NAFTA, in Southeast Asia, ASEAN. Corporation ownership is splintered among many countries, as are the actual production facilities. Corporations and banks are multi-national, and international institutions such as the World Trade Organization have growing control over national economies.

In this more interconnected world, there is less reason for emphasizing the distinction of *us* versus *them*. "We" share values globally, and distinctions are counterproductive to global marketing. Mono-culture arises as trade and communication barriers drop, threatening parochial values. Local political autonomy may be tolerated so long as the polity is integrated into the global marketplace. What matters who is elected, as long as commerce continues uninterrupted? Within this global commercial system, however, a major resistor to international mono-culture is religion or spirituality that offers a state-independent set of values.

Secularism

Secularism in the western world grew in tandem with the "state." In the post-Enlightenment world, Western values were less connected to spirituality and more to material possessions. In the non-Western world, however, religion is often less cloistered. Values and culture are not isolated from, but are integrally connected to spiritual beliefs, which often involve the land and physical environment. In a spiritually based community these are the values shaping day to day behaviors and activities rather than consumer desires. The spiritual context frames what people do and why they do it. It shapes the hopes and dreams of the "ideal" world, independent of material accumulation.

The secular world has, for good or ill, separated spirituality from core consumer values. Religion is not denied, but it is marginalized. Values and desires focus on material consumption, which is increasingly shaped by the global economy. Secularism facilitates globalism by opening societies to alternative values. States not driven by religious values are more open to material-

ist alternatives. Separation of church and state, combined with the wider impact of the welfare state, relegates religion to a private corner of life. With the isolation of religion, non-consumer values in general are marginalized. Secularism replaces civic religious values with civic economic values as ideal life goals.

Accompanying the global exchange of goods are shared values for those goods. Global marketing calls for us to demand the same commodities. As the vision of a customer expands to include the whole world, so also promotions and advertising encompass the whole world. As global communications make this possible, global consumer values have arisen. Ethnic culture is reduced to food and clothing, and even food and clothing may be subsumed by global consumer replacements. The same clothing, the same music, the same retail outlets may be found in almost every country of the world. Rock group T-shirts and Nike shoes may be found anywhere. Star Trek paraphernalia and references are globalized. "Resistance is futile!" How then does this growing mono-culture influence the autonomy demands of peripheral communities?

Decline of the State

In a globalized world the state is less the central instrument of power and domination and less the central source of material reward. Elites are less concerned with political hegemony to the extent that it is less relevant to economic power. In a world where markets and corporations are international, rules governing exchange cannot be made solely by individual states. Instead they are increasingly set by trans-national organizations such as the European Community, NAFTA, the World Trade Organization, and the International Monetary Fund. Employment in trans-national organizations and corporations further weakens loyalty to individual states.

In this global economic system, local political autonomy does not threaten globally based economic power. The local consumer is still part of the global market regardless of where political boundary lines are drawn. In an interdependent world the myth of nationalism is less necessary, and indeed may be counterproductive. Global exchange is not facilitated by perceiving customers as "others" or enemies.

The decline of nationalism, in turn, leads to weaker pressures for national assimilation. Customers must be catered to, not hated. As the "other" in the international arena becomes less threatening when they are customers, so the existence of the "other" within national borders also becomes acceptable. Customers are customers. They need not be politically assimilated when they are already economically assimilated. One of the few remaining sources for resisting the global consumer mono-culture comes from religio-spiritual value systems that challenge consumerism—hence Barber's *McDonaldization vs Jihad.*

The North

While the technological revolution has brought global communication to the remotest corners of the world, there remains a geographic and demographic core and periphery, and northern regions remain peripheral, both geographically and economically (Young, 1992). Technological advances have not eliminated the effects of harsh climates, inconvenient geography and reduced daylight. These characteristics have maintained the peripheral nature of the North. The challenging environment discourages migration from the South, and local populations remain small.

Small populations are less attractive to economic interests. Small numbers of potential customers, and thus small returns, do not encourage extraordinary efforts to extend markets, for the potential return may not be worth the cost. However, while the small and peripheral nature of Northern communities may reduce pressures for political assimilation, their ability to resist global values will only occur if local value systems are able to resist the mono-cultural McDonaldization disseminated through global communications. Peripheral communities may have a greater ability to resist this economic hegemony if they have a separate spiritual value base.

For these communities, technology is a tempting, forbidden fruit that opens the way to global cultural values. Accepting technology is tempting because of the illusion that it is controllable (you do not *have* to buy). It is also less threatening because the cultural encroachment does not include a physical takeover. Local political control may be retained, yet that control may be powerless to resist the hegemony of global consumer values.

Case Studies

It is within this global transactional framework that Northern communities are resisting state hegemony and negotiating new rules for interaction with dominant states. This issue of *The Northern Review* examines the interactions between various communities and the hegemonic state.

In the opening article Professor Clive Thomas asserts the North is not unique because of its latitude, rather its peripheral relationship to the dominant core society has analogs throughout the world. It is this core-periphery relationship that shapes the northern political economy. Professor Thomas uses Alaska intergovernmental relationships to show center domination at both national and regional levels. He outlines the particular context of Alaska and some of its singular characteristics.

Dr. Søren Forchhammer presents a historical perspective of the Danish relationship to Greenland, demonstrating how the dominant center of Denmark maintained control over Greenland through integration of local councils into the dominant political system. Despite granting a degree of autonomy,

the important economic issue of mineral extraction was excluded from home rule purview. In 1978 Home Rule was granted to a society thoroughly integrated into the dominant political economy. With resource flows guaranteed, local control no longer threatens economic elites. The introduction of the local Councils in the mid-19th century contributed to the formation of current Greenlandic society. These councils introduced European political concepts and institutions like nation, democracy, and civil society. Local political control was acceptable within an environment where trade was controlled by core elites.

Professors Gladden and Thornton present normative arguments for local control. Professor Gladden, however, in examining Finland's northern wilderness and tourism industries does not privilege the aboriginal population over other rural citizens. He advocates local control, but not ethnic control, over resources. His thesis assumes local integration into the larger global economic system.

Professor Thomas Thornton advocates for ethnic-based control of local resources, known as "subsistence" rights in Alaska. His argument is based upon an ethic of preserving cultural identity, and he explains how control of local fish and game is a part of the very social fabric of Native Alaskan society. Preservation of this separate cultural identity is presented as simple justice, and ethically necessary. The themes and issues Professor Thornton discusses are part of the intergovernmental struggle outlined by Professor Thomas.

Ms. Caroline Brown and Professor Phyllis Morrow focus on a particular core-periphery interface. They present a case study of the child welfare regime and the struggle over what laws (and underlying values) will govern child/family/society relationships. In this case, as well as in the subsistence debate described by Professor Thornton, the national government sides with the local peripheral group in its struggle with local core groups. At local levels, issues of governance are still salient, whereas at national levels they are less important if they do not interfere with national economic issues. Dominant core values have increasingly imposed themselves onto native peripheral society. Native groups have been able to respond through alliance with the federal government and through the core society court system.

Professor Bryan Downes describes a local land planning process in the Yukon Territory of Canada that includes all local groups, including First Nations. In this process Native groups are stakeholders recognized as having legitimate rights to participate in the larger process. However, Downes is not clear about how First Nation groups view the process. The particular lesson of this process is the requirement for institutionalization. Without such institutionalization to ensure continuity, the community planning process may end up a temporary anomaly, derailed by changes in government.

Professors David Natcher and Gerald McBeath present us with two suc-

cess stories of peripheral group power. Professor Natcher describes how First Nations have asserted local control via land agreements with the dominant core. These agreements have elements of co-management of natural resources allowing local values to influence local development. Professor McBeath recounts a success when the local group integrates into the dominant political system. When Alaskan Natives, through majority rule, took control of the local polity—when they played the game by core society rules—they benefitted both politically and economically. Professor McBeath cautions us, however, that this success may have been purchased at the cost of assimilation into the dominant society's institutional values.

Likely Outcomes

With the decreasing importance of local political control to global economic power we are likely to see more political autonomy, if not outright independence. As globalism decreases elite requirements for political hegemony, minority communities may be allowed more leeway to negotiate local control arrangements with states.

Although globalism exerts extreme pressures on local identities, those communities with strong non-material, spiritual traditions may be more successful at resisting the global cultural hegemony than secular communities.

Greenland, because of its cultural affinity with the rest of the world, can probably look forward to increased autonomy as it has integrated into the global economy. Alaskan Natives may not be able to resist cultural assimilation pressures if they embrace secular economic values. They may, however, secure more political independence.

In Alaska, it will be interesting to see if the next few years formalize the alliance between local and national centers on the issue of oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR). The theory that national and world economic elites only oppose local control when it impacts the global economy would seem to predict that local Native groups will be unable to resist the future opening of the ANWR to global economic interests.

Conclusion

We are confronted with the question of whether local political autonomy is irrelevant, whether local values are irrelevant, and whether resistance to globalism in the postmodern age is futile. Minority self determination is increasingly acceptable to global elites as long as local political control does not threaten global economic power.

Globalism, secularism and consumerism have weakened state power increasing the possibility of local autonomy for northern communities. The challenge each cultural community must address is separation from, versus assim-

ilation into the global consumer mono-culture. Northern communities may have some advantages in the struggle. Small populations may be under less pressure to assimilate because they are less valuable to the world market. Less desirable geography decreases assimilation pressures of colonization and immigration. Local religio-spiritual value systems may be able to resist *McWorld*. Yet the siren call of globalization is not easily denied and the record of cultures succumbing to its temptations is daunting. Perhaps communities with political autonomy and a separate cultural/spiritual value base can resist globalism. Or is resistance futile?

About the Author

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